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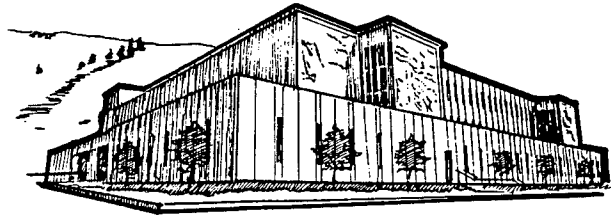
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University of
Montana

VIOLENT MERCY

By

Marnie Bullock

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 1986

M.A., Southern Illinois University, 1989

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

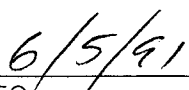
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1991

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I. Godly Woman Go-Go

THE PROVINCE OF NAMING

When it started, I thought, "It will stop
in a week." When it didn't stop
after a week, I decided it would never stop.
We will roll like this until we die,
first Noah, then me, then our sons
in turn, each wife in turn,
until we leave the ark to our grandchildren
who will be too many for this boat
which was not built to endure
both our misuse and the future.

But Noah believes forty days, forty nights, and counts
from when God wakes him to when God tires him.
For each mark on the wall I credit God
with one more cycle of baffling me—
the grace that keeps us dry and safe makes us sweat
as we care for the animals we brought with us.
The math of birth and death has given us
threes and eights and twelves
where we once had twos and sevens—
and because of me, a zero.

I do not know the name of those I killed,
but they were birds, white birds, and small,
noisy, very, with beaks like thorns.
Assigned to feed them and clean their cages,
I found myself smothering their clamor this morning,
avoiding caring as I shoved them into the flood
with the soiled straw of animals and humans.

Until today I've amused Noah
with the clumsy grind of my paraphrase.
"Crow," I insist, when he says "raven";
when he murmurs "dove," I say "pigeon."
Naming has ever been the province of Biblical men,
but in memory of the two winged souls
whose names I cannot remember,
and although my own name will not be remembered,
I follow my husband during inventory
and mouth each name as he counts.

This Noah, is my prayer: anteater, antelope,
binturong, boar, herring hog, jackass,
pack rat, and wolf; adder, asp,
horned viper and milk snake; albatross,

(no stanza break)

("The Province of Naming," cont'd.)

bobolink, vulture, and wren.

My praying done, my stomach full,
I join my husband in a rhythm
we share with the animals.
Two by two we join, male and female,
in a sweat I prefer to that of toil.
We come to each other both tender and loud,
until the humid air is thick with cries
and stifled cries, until line by gleaming line
the beveled gopher wood echoes this noise we make,
which is neither praise nor complaint.

SONS OF GOD, DAUGHTERS OF MEN

They were a flood-inspiring lot, an evil race of giants
born of antediluvian earth women
who bedded down with angels more beautiful than dreams;

hundreds of years and prophets later, beautiful Gabriel
told Mary, "Don't be afraid. You have found favor.
Nothing's impossible." And she went home "with child."

These are connections not widely discussed by Baptists
and others uncomfortable with the bodily Bible,
its fleshy parallels to the Greek myths,

but I am drawn by this merging of abstract and concrete,
by the idea of an orgasm that is truly spirit and flesh.
Although Gabriel was an angel, Gabriel was a man

in the only sense I know of late—clearly defined gender
without discernible sex—his celibacy making him radiant,
as if beauty and uselessness deserved one another.

And so, ever unrealistic in my expectations of men,
I yearn for an angel, a man who has gone on,
whose time in my bed will demand both desire and faith;

who has descended with a mission, who won't need a job
or sleep, who will tell me secrets, who will want
more than anything to eat solid food, to play sports;

who will say to me, "This is how you earn your wings:
exhale with the effort of the bench press,
the tricep pull. Watch the shaping week by week and wait

for bumps to appear on your shoulder blades. Remember,
wings are first obvious in the burn of exhaustion."
Knots of something like calcium emerge as you lift

so that the tearing of skin is less vivid than the rush
of cool air, the reaching out of appendages so near
the heart, their unfolding feels like joy itself.

TENDER

Short and ill-made, I played baseball alone,
hit fungoes to trees, rolled the ball
to make diving catches, called the game.
My closet was an earth-space station
with jar lids and milk cartons for controls;
on the top shelf there was no gravity.

X-rays in St. Louis showed a new locket
and a sharper curve each year; scoliosis
demons and aliens held my spine.
the muscle spasms and scratched bones
of surgery taught me indolence—
I couldn't run or jump or even sit for long.

The scar stayed tender for years.

I began to think of my soul
as a muscle. I wanted to pray
until sweat came, but when I sat
in wooden pews, my shoulders fell asleep
and I would lean forward, eager,
too serious to sing about lambs.

Cut through, back to front, I'd fly
over the sun-warmed bricks of the Bible,
but it was play when I concentrated
to the sky, asking the underbelly
of the firmament to hold my body put right.

MOON TICKS

In the bright sun the blood-swollen ticks looked like moons
against the mulish hides of our old mutts.
My brother and I pulled them off without fear
of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, an affliction
and region we barely believed in.

We lined them up in an oval that spanned
the garage and half basketball court,
tried briefly to slalom around them on skateboards.
But popping them was better than missing them,
though that meant losing whatever Olympics we called it.

After an hour, the concrete was a maze
of blood stained at regular intervals.
Willing to be known only as vandals,
we turned into liars as well as killers
and called it motor oil and paint when confronted.

We were quiet as we poured bleach and scrubbed that night,
but we couldn't help feeling like prophets:
we had seen the moon turn red
during the day, permanent blood turn black
under a moon so full it looked sick with light.

GODLY WOMAN GO-GO

Her name was Joy and she spoke as if bleached white corn silks shuttled from her ankles to the corners of the stage. I was fifteen when I saw that, and knew it was Jesus in her. And she didn't like to cry, she said, in front of people, but some days she couldn't help it, did we know what she meant. I didn't, but the floral-skirted women around me nodded and murmured, so I smiled with the rest when she stood helpless in front of a demon-possessed overhead projector, weeping over a seminar pamphlet that said "Godly Woman Go" instead of "Godly Women Go," knocking her grammar off course. Even Christians are subject to typos, she laughed finally, and off we went, mapping out stores we could buy clothes in—those with underwear, not lingerie—making lists of restaurants where no liquor was served, and then the intangible travels, a clever transition, I thought, all the places where God wanted and did not want our hearts. Do go to the fortress of modesty, the small dark closet of prayer, the well-lighted brick house of marital love. Do not go to the alley of cigarette smoking, the smoky, dingy, neon-lined, rapist-filled bar of alcoholism, and no matter how tempted Godly women are to drive too fast, they never go cruising on the soul-killing freeway of free love. A good Baptist girl, I took her advice like a communion cracker, placed it carefully on my tongue without thinking saltine, sucked until it was chewable, and I swear on a gym of Bibles I came close to swallowing, but when she raised her voice one last time it was the fluorescent office cubicles of lesbianism she warned us about, and the marijuana-filled libraries and dorms of communist girls' schools on the East Coast, and finally it was authority Godly women never went to, deferring always decisions on meals and wallpaper and baby names and car purchases and every goddam everything. Godly women go to any adult male before they make up their biologically, spiritually, but gracefully inferior goddam Godly minds, she said, it's God's way to be Godly, and although I could not muster what I can now, "Godly woman go to hell," I did stand and swagger out, "This Godly woman go home."

THE SECOND COMING

When the bong water spilled and left a stain,
More than one of us saw the Savior's face;
Just a week later it's happened again—
As I seasoned the wok, that same Jesus
Grinned up. He's shaved the beard but you can tell
It's him. He looks like he's about to speak—
We're praying so that when he does, he will
Address our present concerns. I think
He's prepping us for a full-body show.
I dreamed that he appeared to me alone
Beside a barn back home—he danced along
The parapet like he was in Berlin—
"Welcome to my world," he shouted, and laughed
As he pulled me up. "Will you be going back?"

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

My cousin Blake renders the question of incest
ripe and relevant, he's so gorgeous.
First cousins are illegal, and gross,
second cousins are an embarrassment,

but removed once more, third cousins
are practically strangers, familiar genes
friendly but able to pool enough distance
to skirt retardation, stupidity, insanity.

Even if he were my brother, I'd be crazy
wanting that curly brown hair in offspring
of my own. "Roane family's reigning Adonis,"
my Aunt Becky calls him, joking first

on a day fraught with side dishes and puns.
Her second: "So the whole family can be here,"
the punch line to why on earth we'd want
to hold our reunion at Roane Cemetery.

Three long, loaded picnic tables for the living,
some forty odd shaded acres for the dead,
we feast on fried chicken and count jello salad
as a vegetable to make room for homemade ice cream,

German chocolate sheet cake, and coconut pie,
the sinful trinity of the dessert kingdom.
We walk off the stupor of holiday gluttons
at right angles through the graveyard, eyeing

the fresh clay of relations so far removed
we hadn't noticed their recent demise.
Back where I no longer remember funerals,
where I don't even recognize names,

where tombstone rubbings reveal history faded
from almost two centuries of wind and rain,
you can read on the backs of some markers,
"J.W. Reynolds Monument Company," carved

deeper than the names and dates on front.
All their ads brag, "We're the ones
you've heard about all your life." It's true:
I have worn diapers and pinafores and go-go boots

to the Roane Family Reunion, blue jeans

(no stanza break)

("Truth in Advertising," cont'd.)

in high school when I did not respect
the dead or my mother's wishes. Their jingle
sounds like a hymn against resurrection,

its minor chords almost Jewish.
What I get from this gathering
is older and more jokes, one
so good it's etched in stone.

IN MEMORIAM: MY PLAYING DAYS

I mend my glove with rawhide, twisting
in and pulling through what was once
a permanent bracelet, sewed on me
by a man who said, "When it falls off,
sew it on someone else, someone kind."
But this is not misuse, to wind
the darker strip of leather with lighter,
because my glove will never feel again
the friendly slaps and louder smacks
of softballs tossed or aimed or screamed.
I cannot play so poorly what I love so well.

I have stared down ground balls with dreams
of being base hits—I have fielded them
cleanly and bravely, instinctual as dirt
swallowing seeds and bearing fruit;
I have realized my own dream of a blooper
into shallow left; I have sacrificed
and I have scored. But too often I panic
before the slow pitch leaves the pitcher:
instead of a batter batting or an outfielder
holding runners on second and third,

I see a muscled and married Baptist evangelist
who once bet me he knew more theologians.
When I matched him old man for old man,
countering Buber with Bonhoeffer,
topping his Luther with Tillich,
he wound up like Valenzuela, nodded,
spit, and let fly an invisible pitch
I squatted to catch. We struck out
all the batters in the church nursery
and swaggered out through the dark sanctuary
to the poorly lit parking lot.

We spoke of the Cubs, whom he prayed for,
and the Cardinals, my team, who won
the series that year. At each conflicting
statistic he stepped closer until he choked
and ran to his car, leaving me wishing
I hadn't played at catching what he threw,
as I now wish to catch nothing thrown.

II. Life as Beverly

WOMEN'S CENTER CRISIS LINE

He was a drug dealer when I moved in with him.
We met at the doctor's office where I work—
he told me I had real pretty eyes and asked
if glaucoma was contagious. You can get pot
from the government with some diseases, he'd heard,
and figured he'd catch one, if that was the case.
I told him I didn't know. I still don't know.

After being a drug dealer he got this job
at K-Mart which he liked pretty well
until his boss bought him some pajamas
so he would stop sleeping in his clothes.

So the last couple of months have been rough.
I've got my job, and he works sometimes,
and we still have the greenhouse downstairs,
but now he spends most of his time hunting
or talking about hunting or sharpening his knives.

And last night when I was shaving my legs
he came in with his Rambo knife real sharp
and started talking about Japanese sex games
you play with blades and he was rubbing
my leg with the knife handle and then
he took my Personal Touch razor away from me
and pretty much shaved my legs with his knife.
He only cut me a couple of times
but that's not really why I'm calling
because I could tell he didn't mean to hurt me—
what I'm wondering is how weird that is
and if you get a lot of calls like this.

GIFTS OF LOVE

He likes to see my thumb on the blade,
pressing the ribbon to the scissors,
he likes the sound of ribbon curling,
but most of all he likes curled ribbon on me
and under me, piles of it. More,
he says, Baby curl some more.

When he calls me Baby he doesn't mean I'm a child.
I've curled ribbon professionally
in a store that sold helium balloons
with cartoons on them, but that's not why
I do it well. It has to do with the curve
of the hip and the curve of the womb—it's true—
which is why men can't wrap presents.

He gave me this dress still in the sack.
Here, he said, and threw it to me.
He wanted to see it on me,
and if I'd had to unwrap it, well,
the moment would've passed.

LIFE AS BEVERLY

My name is not Marilyn because I was born in August, 1962, weeks after the suspicious death of my father's all-time favorite woman in the movies. I won't sentence her to that, my mother said about beauty and tragic ends, and named me Beverly because she likes women named Beverly—her hairdresser, the pastor's wife where she grew up. By the time my sister was born in '65, mother'd heard all about the Kennedys and wanted a connection, public or not, to John-John, or one of Bobby's sons, or even Bobby, if he aged well. The names don't fit, not really,

I'm the blonde, first of all, and Marilyn's sweet enough to sew all her own clothes, like the denim maternity jumper she was wearing today with baby elves cross-stitched on the bib. Cute as hell until she dripped beets all down her front. Elf train wreck in a tunnel, my boyfriend whispered before he started in on the meat stuff. The ham was juicy, I'll grant him that. But he bent the damn steak knife, he was so excited. He told my mother he'd never had ham so good, it was his favorite now that he knew how good it could be. And then he grinned at me like I didn't guess what he was really talking about, like I'd miss the fact he had a knife in his hand. Boy I hope there's steak knives under the tree for us Baby, but there weren't, and what's worse,

my mother bought me a hair removal system. Don't even take it out of the box, he hissed. I wouldn't have—those things hurt, I hear, yanking your stubble out at the root, and besides, he's right about the way he shaves my legs. It's smooth and time we spend together every day.

THE RADIO PREACHER CAME ON AT DAWN AFTER AN ALL NIGHT TRIBUTE
TO THE ROLLING STONES

Funny how the man who threw ink at the devil
is the same man who wrote "Away in a Manger."
How well do we know Martin Luther was the point
of the sermon, I think, but I wasn't awake
for the whole thing. I know enough to bet
the man they named Lutherans after wouldn't tie
his girlfriend to her four poster bed and ramble
off at midnight and leave the radio on loud
so she couldn't really go to sleep let alone get up
and go to the bathroom which is not a problem yet,
because what's on my mind besides the man
who invented being something besides Catholic
is whether he ever licked somebody's toes
and then painted them red hot red. Did they do that
then, paint toe nails, I mean, back when
he was alive, whenever that was. Two or three things
I don't know about Mr. Luther. Doubt he'd get high
off laughing gas from the whipped cream can
and dance around the room singing Beverly my love
you're the most beautiful when you can't move.
Thank God you're home, I'm supposed to scream
when I hear his key in the door. I might say that
or I might take a vow of not talking to him
until he says he's sorry. They did horrible things,
is what I say next, and he says Tell me about it,
and I might, or I might read him my really long list
of ways he's giving me a nervous breakdown along with
all those orgasms. I know you can't get everything
you want but please Jesus don't let me wet the bed.

MEMORIAL DAY

I'm tired of him waking me up with that wooden leg
because first of all I don't know whose it was
before he brought it home, and I can't kiss my way
up it without expecting a warm purple stub at the end.
He probably stole it from the morgue and now
some poor cripple's coffin is off-balance forever.

Would you love me if I'd lost a leg in 'Nam?
he wanted to know, and even when I said Of course,
and anyway you were too young for that conflict,
he closed his eyes which meant he was thinking
and I wondered if there was a trunk in his brain
where he kept all his weird ideas,

and if he was as bad about cleaning it up
as he is everything else. No hope, I've decided,
of tackling his brain the way I did his closet,
which was worth getting rid of the smell
but not quite worth the lecture on privacy cases
currently before the Supreme Court. I'm failing

his latest test. I can't share my bed
with him and his medical junk another night.
Just because I don't want something that smells
like furniture polish between my legs when it's humid
and we don't have an air conditioner doesn't mean
I'm not a patriot. He's not a veteran of anything.

LOCAL THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

Three questions, I want to say to the man with the ice pick in my driveway. What are you doing? Should I move my car? Are you a terrorist? The third's been nagging me since last summer when he moved in, unloading dynamite, boxes of it, and sure, they could've been flares, but no one has that much car trouble. Well, he does, but that Duster never leaves the driveway long enough to need a flare. And maybe that's why he gets rides with other scary looking people in other backfiring cars. It's not just racism, either, but he sure as hell ain't Italian, the way falafel vapors hit me like hello when I open my front door. Half his furniture's in the garden, what used to be a garden. He let tomatoes rot right on the vines, and if that's not a sign of him being occupied with unhealthy things, then I don't know what. But that's definitely a detonator, I've seen detonators. Looks to me like he's going to blast ice off the driveway instead of shoveling all along, like he should've, since part of his rent's maintenance. I don't mind wearing boots every time I step outside, to the mail box, wherever, but living alone makes me nervous enough, and I don't know if my insurance covers explosions. And if I call the police or the F.B.I. or just the operator, what do I say? Excuse me, I'd like to report a local threat to national security? Right. Like detonators aren't legal.

III. Violent Mercy

DEAR DISSATISFIED MEDIUM

No, no, no, Maureen: Nazis never chased me
 through a forest with no horizon in France.
 The snow that blurs the hills and sky there
 didn't cover my child-sized footprints
 almost as soon as I left them
 because I never ran with a package
 wrapped in brown paper, meant for my parents.
 The vague path I laid through black trees
 didn't lead SS troops to the farmhouse
 where my big Catholic family hid.
 The quick slaughter of all I loved
 can't explain why I don't remember
 my former life; my escape and later suicide
 can't be responsible for the guilt I feel
 for the ease of this life:

I am overcome

by the slightest cooperation. At dusk
 sunset pastels pale next to ambers,
 reds, greens—the language of lights.
 Even in this selfish age cars signal right,
 left, slow. I'm stunned by the lack
 of tragic accidents. A man walks by, no limp,
 no tics, no visible scars, his skin is clear.
 I've gone months without seeing a burn victim.
 No one in my family has died for years—
 my family, my God. I was never molested,
 Maureen. It's your repressed junior high scandal
 driving your whiskey drunk tonight.

I called

about my enduring passion for William Hurt.
 Are these things ever cosmic links, I asked,
 and bribed answers out of you by trying to see
 what I remembered of my past lives.
 I didn't lie. I did see snow and France, and yet
 I felt like I was teasing you the whole time.
 Turn my tarot all night, dear dissatisfied medium:
 my only curse is a life I'm often content with,
 my only burden the urge and words to praise my luck.

DOING THE RIGHT THING

With long hair she looked like Robert Plant;
with short hair she looks like no one
in particular, a small boy from England
perhaps, with her coat and tie and cap on.

She'd have been a cute little lesbian
except she likes men who like little boys
so much they want a girl who looks like one.
She's nineteen—technically it's not abuse.

And I have done what's right by her,
at noon, in a neutral setting:
"Your problem isn't men," I tell her
as we eat lunch. "It's your drinking."

She wants to look like Peter O'Toole
when she gets old; that's all we talk about
until I ask about her smile—
it looks out of place unless she's passed out.

People are kind, she tells me,
to children, animals, drunks on bicycles.
She's not wrong. She's just unhappy
and finds my calm unspeakably dull.

My urge to finger someone else's soul,
to soothe the toxins there, embarrasses me.
Her eyes are forgiving in the sun, nearly gold,
her hair the same color as my cooling tea.

FOR JULIA WHOSE WEDDING I UNFORTUNATELY CANNOT ATTEND

I wish we'd yelled "pencil dick" and "chicken shit"
 but we didn't—we just stumbled through the alley
 back to your house, lit up for Halloween
 with tiki torches and the neon tombstones of James Dean,
 John Gardner, Sylvia Plath, seventeen road kills.
 We'd been discussing the curve of a certain poet's penis
 and his impotence, and you were dressed like Pebbles,
 when the long black shadows of three young men
 laid down on our shadows from behind us. "Hey, baby,"
 they rumbled as they felt you up and ignored me.
 You warned them you knew karate, but my God,
 you had a ponytail in the middle of your head.
 I nudged the tallest away from you, thinking I'd hug you,
 thinking I don't know what, but it didn't matter.
 I got the back of his fist in my mouth—"Bitch
 don't be pushing me"—and then they ran. The chips
 gone from my front teeth prove they were real, otherwise
 I'd wonder at the convenience of all our absurdest fears
 confirmed on the dark streets of a Midwestern Mardi Gras:
 men are violent, women shouldn't walk alone,
 women shouldn't wear short skirts, you're the pretty one,
 I'm the brave one, you're too shapely
 to defend yourself, women shouldn't talk about penises,
 I'm the smart one. Your husband punched the wall
 and someone else's husband consoled me. Divorced now,

you're ready to get married again.
 I've sworn off married men.

It's the color of lilies I don't know the name of,
 the penis of the man it hurts me now to love,

and the stanza where we discuss your fiancé
 in graphic terms is airbrushed away

out of respect and ignorance—you've found a man
 in my hometown I haven't gone down on.

Why'd we gasp like he was Elvis when that drunk
 versifier with James Dean sideburns showed up?

His hard-ons were hard to hold onto as mercury.
 So why'd we chase him when he left your party?

"Did we," you asked in a poem, "size up our feet
 on top of a table?" Yes, and we were just about

(stanza break)

("For Julia," cont'd.)

as drunk as two literary bimbos can be,
dancing to Patsy with two married geeks

about a million years ago, baby, we were
young enough to forget how big our boobs are.

The day you wear your mother's wedding dress
for the second time I will toast your Baptist wedding
with whiskey and call the optometrist's office
where absurdly the reception will be held and shout
congratufuckinlations over the p.a. system,
and even your grandmother will forgive me. Lovely—
we'll both be lovely this Halloween. You're the bride
and I'm Mary Shelley writing Frankenstein. Percy's off
plugging someone else. Did I mention I'm happy for you?
Now that I've written it down, I see it's true.

DUMB

My little soldier fingers, asked to stop
the furnace rattle, reached, before my eyes,
the door labeled "Hot Don't Touch"; then muffled
in ice, throbbed all night the failure of language.

Today they begin the slow rejection
of blistering skin; since my fingers know
my mouth—in anxiety chewed by it,
in hesitation pressed over it—I know
I will bite through the peeling, see myself

raw and wonder about courage and patience;
soap and typing will sting, and words straining
to be spoken will saw through the red prints
like teeth: "But...what?" I will say, or start to,
before my palm damns opinion
down my throat to live in bile and silence.

JUNE, 1963

After finding an unfulfilled summer
on the green side of a strawberry,
her own unripening found her
hiding her face with her hands, the way leaves

embroidered on a child's apron
guard red gingham from the stains
a detailed Sunday dinner can give one.
She had avoided the sun once again;

moreover, she had hardly missed it:
potatoes had to be scrubbed for supper,
and her alphabetizing wasn't done yet.
Between "Kewpie Doll" and "kite" mother called her,

"That nice young man's here to pick you up."
Aghast at his long fingers steering the car,
she busied herself organizing her purse:
keys on the right, billfold in front of the mirror.

He bought her a cola; she crossed her ankles
as they watched everyone else dance:
boys twirled girls like straight lines do circles,
like silverware and plates, like blades of grass and ants.

"Well, there's the moon," he said, sounding surprised
as it whited out the pupils and blue of her eyes.
The poor boy found himself kissing two small onions
fixed on a parsnip. "Good night," she said. "Good night."

POCAHONTISS

Late at night when the fat girls lindy hop alone,
she arrives in her fringed chamois dress and shimmies
like there's no tomorrow.
In fact there are no more
next-mornings in which she will resemble the grace
of the evening before.

Her husband directs her seduction from his perch
by the door, dances with her when no one else will,
which isn't that often.
The blind lead singer smiles,
"This one for Pocahontiss," drawing the name out
past insult. Then he sings,

"Whole lotta swappin' goin' on!" Everyone hoots
as Pocahontiss leads him onto the dance floor.
His reading hands move fast
down her back to her ass,
her body familiar as a well-thumbed Penthouse,
a recurring wet dream.

She changes partners every time the song changes,
making a holiday out of desperation.
Tonight she's the prom queen—
everyone goes home pleased
to be included, or grateful to be ignored,
all loyal court voyeurs.

VIOLENT MERCY

In my windowless basement I lift weights,
climb the stairs slack-jawed and glowing
with the sweat of my own volition.
What is it to you if I admire
what I have created? In the dim light
of my bedroom, angles where there were curves,
marked curves where there was slack.
I have studied your footprints
between the junipers and my window
and know you have small, wing-tipped feet.

The lace panties I hang on the line
are not mine. I don't wear what I see
as bait, filigree worms, fatly
drawing you into the spilled cup
of light by the open door. You slip in
behind me, not swift enough
to be shadow, and swing your knife
like a semaphore, spelling cut,
meaning kill. Poor slob, your flailing is easy
to angle through—my fist flies to your throat,
my knee heads straight for your impotent lap.
This is the gulping silence fiends crave,
the bedroom growing darker from inside.

When you wake, the party is in full swing
and you are our naked, jowl-ridden piñata,
trussed like a roast pig between two trees
where the hammock was this morning,
where the keg is tonight. My lady friends toast you
with cuts and slaps and kicks; tired finally
of bruising you, we nudge you just enough
to spill the beer balanced on the swell
of your hairy stomach. You won't die
from what we inflict, we who have studied justice
tempered with mercy, who prefer mercy
violent enough to make your repentance concrete,
mercy coupled with jabs and slices
that will echo in our finger tips
then pass as we sleep tonight, having caught
our first criminal, safely dreaming
what you cannot imagine, unseen.

ON FEMINIST THEORIES OF LANGUAGE

I can't hear you I have a penis in my ear
the story goes, and get out of that car!
gear shifts and exclamation points alike
designed to penetrate us, so to speak,
to prep us for the big game,
for Hi Honey, welcome home.
But let's say what's in your ear is slower
and dopier than a fruit fly in October;
you've traced the origins of your speech
to Bo Diddley and Sesame Street;
you've had sex quietly in the back seat,
but when you have to moan, it's words you use.
Better not to theorize, Baby—just mumble some blues.

JULY 1990

Except that the naked man wasn't eating huckleberries,
it was the quintessential Montana undulating down
the river on an inner tube afternoon. I'm so sore
today I can't scour a pot right—left it tea dinky
and brillo pad silver in swirls. My river shoes,
so christened with my first step in the Blackfoot,
recline pigeon toed, full of sand, outside the door
where I kicked them off. I hear if you glue felt
to the bottom of your waders, or in this case,
your newly christened Nikes, you won't slip.
If I'd told Miss Jane's Primary Sunday School class
you could take Paul on the road to Damascus off
the felt board and cut it up and glue it on your shoes
and walk in the River Jordan and not slip, they'd've known
I was lying. Would I wonder then if Jesus had
felt on the bottom of his sandals, and only seemed
to be walking on water? That Peter, with no felt,
slipped the way I slipped yesterday, trying to climb
out of the river at last? All night I felt the gentle whoop
of waves beneath me, smelled the pines breathing heavy
for fear of fire, saw the outline of mountains—
one hairy M after another, punctuated at one bend
by a naked man who squatted until we passed, who waved
while his clothed wife and child waved, who then stood
and watched us float downstream, exposed every 360 degrees
as I guided my craft in circles through the rapids.

BLUE MOON OVER FARGO

The lounge car's empty except for me and an undergrad on his way to Seattle whose coach seat's been commandeered by a woman with more babies than space. "The second full moon in the same month is always the blue moon," I told him hours ago as we toasted the New Year with dollar margaritas. "Fat moon," he slurred, "they should call this one the fat moon." At dawn it's a thinly sliced turnip, but in Wisconsin last night it was almost sick with light, a skillet filled to bubbling over with gravy. Fat all right, and lazy as far as blue moons go. I'm sitting alone at dawn, my travel paramour sleeping off 1991 like it's been a hard year already. In each beige apartment next to the tracks in towns west of here—Rugby, "the geographical center of North America," and Wolf Point, where the Wild Horse Stampede bucks across the Poplar River, there's a man on a balcony wearing a ski mask, drinking a cup of decaf, facing the morning and praising the lord through the steam he holds in his hands. Every one of them's a preacher and every one could be the man another blue moon and my mother set aside for me years ago. Coulda been me, my blues song goes, I coulda been a preacher's wife. I coulda sewed designs on all the choir robes, I coulda been the potluck queen of casseroles. Instead I'm passing through land where rocks rise up like Jehovah scat—through Havre, "where Indians once drove buffalo off cliffs," through Marias Pass with its statue of my favorite Roosevelt, to Whitefish's "Alpine-style depot." My little car waits while I pass time reading the annotated map as if I could shorten the trip by tracing the route with my thumbnail, gouging the cities where I played poker with Canadian plumbers, where I had a brief liaison in the unisex dressing room, and where it turned midnight, Winona, Minnesota. Everyone in the lounge car sang "Winona," like she was an angel boarding the train there.

DEFECTIVE

A papa now, you rock your preemie girl
and croon a homemade song—
like her it is your own

delible stamp on the air
around you. Your name alone
will not keep her near

enough to line your smearing life,
resident expert
on the ephemeral, asker of why.

Your happiness is past tense,
a cigarette already decisively put out
in my palm, of course, the hot

scar of you pink in my fist.
Fading stigmata,
the saint you troubled lives

without resurrection
and calls the bones of your newborn
to bend away from you:

my defects are many, and worth having.
Scoliosis empowered my hunching
away from your paralyzing touch.

Women you love must develop a curse,
a tic, a handicap to inspire
rejection from what they cannot reject.

FOR MARIA

That must feel good, bending from the waist
 to brush long brown hair that doesn't tangle
 but once a month or so. The head rush
 when you swing upright is better still
 on opium antihistamines,
 leftovers from a med student lover of mine.
 Heavy for pills, they're "azure pearls
 of opium, asleep in your palms—
 as if, from the glazed balcony
 of your cheeks, blue tears
 had fallen."* What you got to cry about?
 There are bodies in our future, curves
 and angles of skin, skin, skin.
 Whispers shunning new age sweet talk
 will call us, and here you sit without
 a middle name. I don't mean to be parental
 but of course you feel pathetic
 when there's a hole in your signature.
 Love, I think I'll name you Love,
 and sweep away everything lonely and mundane.
 Say it when you dance in your apartment alone,
 "Don't need no one, my middle name is Love."

[quote from David St. John, "For Georg Trakl"]

WHAT MY FATHER CALLS A DECEITFUL EXAGGERATION

"I am a patriot
 And I love my country
 Because my country is all I know
 I want to be with my family
 The people who understand me
 I've got nowhere else to go"
 Little Steven

When my brother used our Malibu to hit three deer
 in the four weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas,
 holiday puns that year centered on how many bucks
 it took to fix a car, how much doe. When your sister
 brought home her fiance, stuck ribbons on him
 from her birthday presents, we all said, "What a bow."
 When I aimed for the horseshoe pit and hit the water
 instead, the pun ran, "Guess she didn't like that shoe.
 Why? She's gone and pond it." Now you're a man
 with a pun of your own, cousin-next-in-line
 to come of age in a family that marks thresholds
 with word play. "Payne Promoted," the caption starts,
 "to rank of specialist with 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment."
 Well, that's a weak joke, but it's private, Private Payne:
 I can't share what I fear as truth with relatives
 who've tied plastic yellow ribbons on trees and junk cars,
 mail boxes and utility poles, tractors, combines, pickups,
 school buses and dogs, they've tied yellow ribbons on dogs
 in Opdyke, the town we're both listed as formerly from.
 When you return from overseas, it's Fort Bliss
 you'll call home. Texas and your current desert
 look alike to me. I know they're not. I know
 the flies are worse where you are, as are the guns.
 I know you're good at soldiering, and pride sneaks in
 my prayers for you. The picture I have in my kitchen marks
 the last summer I was taller than you. We'd flipped
 a dime store raft upside down, and worked our way across
 the pond, standing up and falling off. We look like hicks
 with the sunset reflected around us, shoreline mud smeared
 on our faces and legs. No notion of politics gripped us,
 and needn't now, not even when I fashion yellow bows
 into peace signs, not even when you have medals to wear
 on special occasions. Come home to where we used to be,
 with all your limbs and your crew cut hair, come home
 pissed at protests, and Private Payne, I'll meet you there.

PLAYING DEAD

My brother and I discovered the Jefferson Davis Monument
by accident the same day I'd bludgeoned a possum
with a broom handle. As we crested a hill
in a part of Kentucky we hadn't planned to see,
there it was, an obelisk
the color of concrete blocks,
the town's few houses gathered close by.
We were silent as I yanked
the car off the blacktop.

This was our childhood dream—a giant pencil
in a wheat field beside the highway,
a place to live with each room on top
of another, a bathroom at the bottom
and the very top, a spiral staircase
from top to bottom, an elevator in the corner
for long trips. We'd wanted double-takes
from passersby, cars pulled over, city folks
puzzled and bug-eyed, wondering out loud why.

Seems when you kill a possum first thing in the morning
nothing amazes you the rest of the day,
although some things disappoint you.
This was a monument to a leader who lost,
no one's home, resentment of the North's invasion
tucked away in Fairview, Kentucky, a middle finger
raised in quiet defiance to the lilac sky.

The remains of the possum were gone
when we got home, either dragged off
by a larger scavenger, or alive and smugly healing
from the wounds I'd inflicted. Sitting on the porch
to watch the night sky, blue-green as bluegrass,
we noted for future use how the blueprints of youth
and vermin and whole regions are apt to play dead.

WEEDY LULLABY For Anna and Lanier

Hymns don't work on this baby—only torch songs
bribe her fussing into sleep. I've planted
Lady Day deep in her soft head:
"Summertime," mostly, though it's a cold spring
in Montana, nowhere near humid enough for blues.
Her sister sleeps upstairs, rousing choruses
of "Amazing Grace" still bouncing off crib slats
like a holy mobile set loose. I stand guard, willing
my notes into warmth until the windows bead up
like a glass of tea, my voice ungainly
and stubborn as a weed. I don't believe
nothing can harm them, but tonight nothing will.

SAVING PENNIES

The penny will certainly live with the dodo
in the part of heaven reserved
for extinct things if I defend it.
Because, you see, I have never voted
for a president who won,
and Tommy Herr was traded to Minnesota
the week after I got his baseball card.
Nonetheless, I cannot watch the penny
become the business of second hand shops
and children bored with monopoly money.

It has in its favor these things:
its name, the name of a girl or a lane;
its color, the sign of good plumbing;
its heft, just right for dead eyes;
its love of prime numbers, seventeen cents
and forty-one cents and seventy-three;
its president, symbol of my native Illinois,
a hard working man who would respect me
for saving my pennies and rolling them up
and spending the quarters I get in exchange
in laundromats and phone booths only;
the only president to wear a bow tie
on his coin, the only one tall enough
to carry off a coin worth so little,
worth one more than nothing, worth saving.

INDEPENDENCE DAY

Drunk on the blaze of my personal arson
and good Tennessee whiskey, I staggered
backwards twenty snaking yards
from my trailer to an oak with a view
of Kiwanis fireworks. Never mind the drought
Southern Illinois was in the middle of—lighter fluid arced
half a halo in front of me sending undergrowth
crackling and hissing in ashes to heaven.
The blurred outline of my friends through the wall of flame
spurred me on. They were the wicked, quenching
my prophet's fire with an earthly garden hose,
mortal buckets and tea kettles of unholy water.
It was vision I was after, miles of it,
punctuated by pink and green screaming meemies
and roman candles. The bottle rockets we'd shot
at each other merely tickled and I wanted to scrape the sky
to yell at the Almighty. I scrambled up the tree
in time for the hollow finale, a giant dandelion
of Sousa flashes that sent me disappointed down
into the gentle arms of a blackout.
I woke unable to articulate
"hangover," the wet-ash smell of war thick as ink,
the charred path behind my trailer still smoking,
beer cans and the pitiful skins of firecrackers
dotting the yard. I stayed in the shower forever grateful
for fire that burned so far and no farther,
but I could not cool the sting of vision limited
by recklessness so easily halted: the blank slate
of acres on acres of hardwood forest burned
uselessly might have rendered more wisdom
than my crooked destruction, meager
in scope, unnamed ivies already rooting again.

IV. Camp Songs

CAMP SONGS

I. Sunday Night

Everyone knows what a marshmallow is,
 but in the factory outside Benton, Illinois,
 they know just how much corn syrup, albumen,
 sugar and gelatin it takes to make
 the inch-high moons. There's talk of a secret
 ingredient, "stirred in when the negroes
 go home." At the Baptist camp down the road
 from the factory, we roast marshmallows
 for free—a local deacon owns the plant
 and rots our teeth for charitable taxes.
 His daughter, a counselor this week, refuses
 to eat any. "There's signs to wash your hands,
 but some just won't," she whispers as I suck
 another burnt one from my roasting stick.

The little balls of blackened candy that I roll
 between my fingers prove again I'm gross
 enough for her to wonder if I'm saved. "Bet
 I'm popular in heaven, Sheila. Bet I get
 to hang out with Jesus more." Pride's
 the danger in that wager—lucky for me
 I'm just teasing the poor little sanctified creep.
 The camp fire and sunset hit the same shade
 of red and all the donated acres glow,
 blessed by what the camp pastor calls the dome
 of God's love and protection. It stretches
 from the front gate to the railroad tracks,
 but nothing keeps the hormones out. Camp's
 like a passion play where no one dies.

"You dirty little niggers," Sheila screams,
 as if only black campers are flinging melted
 marshmallows into trees where they hang briefly,
 like overripe fruit, before dropping on the heads
 of the same junior high campers, black
 and white, who flung them. "At least they're not lit,"
 the youngest counselor, Andy, shouts. "Burning bush,"
 I answer, "burning trees, burning campers...."
 Before we can herd the sticky heathens
 toward the showers, Sheila's said a prayer
 and climbed up on a bench. "It's a sin to waste
 good food," she screams, more target than prophet.
 Ever mindful I'm setting an example,

(no stanza break)

("Camp Songs," cont'd.)

I bend my stick and whip one at her face.

II. Monday

"I seen you throw candy on that white bitch,"
Walter says by way of introduction.
"A bitch is a dog in heat," I respond,
"And God doesn't care what color a dog is
when it's in heat." He smiles, "You got good aim,
anyhow." He's one of our ethnic imports
from the Hudelson Baptist Children's Home,
a Christian alternative to reform schools
and foster homes. My jokes are back-handed
evangelism, and they work—within an hour
Walter repeats the sinner's prayer like it's the pledge
of allegiance. Just like a secret password,
"Forgive me" opens the door it's supposed to
regardless of tone. Well, praise the lord—

he got saved in time to paint the counselors.
Each camper gets a brush and an oval or two
of water color. Walter trades around
for black and heads for Sheila's face. "Look who'
the nigger now," he hoots, his new Christian faith
expressing itself in revenge. "Jesus says
to turn the other cheek," I try to explain,
"You should love your enemies." But I look ridiculous—
my girls have done my makeup for the wedding
they're planning between me and Jeff. His t-shirt's
a tux, the rock for my engagement ring
covers half my hand. Walter wanders
away, but Andy, who's Jeff's best man,
and who looks tie-dyed on top of his farmer's tan,

trots after him. They miss dinner and reappear
in chapel. Jeff and I are entertaining
the restless troops with Smothers Brothers routines—
as head counselors, stalling is our main duty.
"Dong ding ding dong dong, ding ding," gets the laugh
the camp pastor needs to start his sermon.
"Think of Jesus as Indiana Jones,"
he says. "He braided a whip when he got mad
and chased the money changers out of the temple;
he'd have slept through the storm in Mark chapter four

(no stanza break)

("Camp Songs," cont'd.)

but the disciples panicked—Jesus Christ is no wimp—
when he tells the wind to shut up it must;
and an old lady got healed just by touching his clothes."
To illustrate the verse, he calls the first three rows

of campers to the stage. "Christian can of worms,"
he calls it. "Crowd me, crowd me. I need a volunteer
to be the old lady—she's been bleeding for twelve years.
Jeff? Try to touch me through these weirdos."
Red faced, the camp pastor shouts, "Who touched me?"
I'm thinking "Jeff," but the answer is "We all did."
The point is Jesus could feel the power leave—
"The touch of faith's different than the touch of the crowd!"
I pull Andy outside during the show.
His painted t-shirt's dry, but the paint's gone
everywhere else. "Where'd you go?"
I ask. "How much trouble am I in?" he wants to know.
"If it's a lot, then we went for a walk. Truth is,
we went swimming and had hamburgers at Roger's."

"Oh, Jesus, Andy, Roger's? I told everyone
you were praying." Apparently I didn't lie—
before canoeing to Roger's Tackle and Tavern
for real food, Andy had explained why
some stupid people, like Sheila, are put on earth
just so the rest of us can learn to forgive
and ignore them. "Roger's got great burgers,"
Andy grins, "and we prayed before we ate them."
"Your secret's safe," I tell Walter, who's afraid
he'll be sent back to Hudelson. "Just don't screw up again."
He sits beside me at the camp fire, amazed
he's not in trouble. "I want us to be friends,"
I say and put my arm around him. Jeff sits down
beside me. "That's right Walter. We're all friends."

"Do what you want but don't wake me up,"
I tell my puberty stricken Baptist girls,
my head sandwiched between two hot pillows.
But they have questions I just can't ignore.
"Is it a sin to french kiss? Have you done it?"
"Yes," I say, "if you're not married, and yes."
"With Jeff?" they gasp, and hoot at my "oh yes."
I refuse to describe my most frequent sin,
what his baggy camp counselor wardrobe conceals.
"Is interracial dating a sin?" they just wonder,

(no stanza break)

("Camp Songs," cont'd.)

as if Hudelson specifics weren't sleeping
one cabin over. "Only if you french kiss,"
I promise, and seal the inquiry for the night.

III. Tuesday

"That's angels on your hair," is what Walter said,
the jaundiced moon underside of his hand
stroking the inch of air around my head
as if he felt a halo, the wrong end
of holy magnets rejecting his touch.
"If that's a compliment, then I thank you,"
I smile. His good-bye, "I meant the sun, bitch.
Jesus said that thing about the angels,"
sends me startled and blonde to my Bible
concordance. Paul, not Jesus, indeed said
"If a woman have long hair, it is glory
to her, and she have power on her head
because of angels." What kind of power,
I wonder if my angry convert knows.

The kitchen is easy to break into—the screen
folds back and down like the page of a book.
Hands small as mine can reach up to the lock
without tearing the screen more. Everyone thinks
I have a key. I'm not here for ice tonight
like usual—the holy roller counselors sent me
for oil to anoint a camper's softball injury.
Bacon grease's the closest thing I find.
When the camper cries, "Sprained, it's still sprained,"
in the darkened chapel, the tongue-speaking stops,
and I wonder if a more kosher oil would've helped.
"The one thing I don't get," Sheila whines,
"is when God says no." Well, several things puzzle me, dear,
not just this absent miracle, this gaping wound about to
bleed.

IV. Wednesday

Which Old Testament woman was eaten by dogs?
"Jezebel," I answer, loud, before
the camper emcee can give chapter and verse.

(no stanza break)

("Camp Songs," cont'd.)

The counselors are whipping the camp pastor
at Super Bible Trivia, and we're gloating
because his seminary degree is not enough
to beat ambitious young Christians who read
the Bible—Genesis to maps—each year
in preparation for this contest. "Philip!"
Andy shouts, but we all know which disciple
got carried off by God after baptizing
an Ethiopian eunuch. Even Sheila
gets one right. What was Noah's wife's name?
"Trick question!" she screams, "her name's not mentioned!"

"Confess your faults, one to another, pray
one for another, that ye may be healed,"
the camp pastor quotes from James' epistle,
the penguin on his polyester shirt
an isthmus about to be sunk by tides
of sweat from his neck and left arm pit, chapel
ceiling fans whirring but cooling no one.
I focus on another verse, "The tongue's
a fire that defileth the whole body."
Oh, yes—these headlights of desire that aim
from spine to nipple have a tongue to blame,
a tongue the invitation hymn rolls past,
my Jeff belting out the verse that drives us
outside to pray, embarrassed by our lust.

His penis must have come from Sears—brick-pink
and smoothly straight, more implement than organ.
With Jeff, theology's an equation—
the distance between repentance and sin
equals the stroll from chapel to boat dock.
The dock from end to end measures one kiss,
one rolling hug, one dusty sixty-nine.
Some nights the moon shows; some nights a hot breeze
inspires the waves of Lake Benton to knock
canoes and row boats together, gently,
as if the water made their metal flesh.
Tonight the moon's the only miracle
I trust, not orgasm, not repentance.

V. Thursday

Consider me illiterate in body

(no stanza break)

("Camp Songs," cont'd.)

language, I tell people, but it's a lie.
 Rejection reads like a trashy novel
 with the middle chapters torn out. The end
 is happy for the bitch with straight white teeth;
 the in-between is tortuous for me.
 I know I'll stay alone tonight, un-kissed;
 before then, though, I have to watch you scoot
 around the camp fire. Such a masochist,
 I catch the conversation too intense
 for you to turn and say hello—to hold
 my hand or put your arm around my waist—
 by eavesdropping behind your broad shoulders,
 the right one marked by last night's biting kiss.

I'm desperate by the time lights-out is called
 and find you toweling off steam by moonlight,
 the showers afflicted nightly by fuses
 blown by hair dryers, boom boxes, curlers,
 and one plug-in facial sauna, with mist.
 Adonis visits local Baptist camp,
 I think, but say, "So are we speaking yet?"
 You cover genitalia I've seen
 a million times, so I paraphrase God,
 "Who told thee thou wast naked, Jeff dear?"
 Your voice squeaks at first, you clear your throat.
 "A whore—you're acting like a goddam whore."
 You've confessed our sins to the camp pastor
 who recommends prayer, abstinence and fasting.

"I'd be fucking rich if I were a whore.
 You've known a lot of whores, have you, asshole?"
 I scream later in my head, hot, awake
 among a cabin full of sleeping virgins.
 My actual retort involved some tears,
 a prayer choked out kneeling by the shower stall.
 The Bible has its share of Godly whores.
 There's Rahab, Jericho's wall-top harlot—
 God-fearing, she agreed to hide the spies
 Joshua sent, and when the walls came down,
 the scarlet cord she'd tied in the window
 identified the only household saved.
 She may have been a foremother of Jesus—
 the Word of God skimps on certain details,

like whether or not there was a hand job
 or two on the roof where she hid the spies,

(no stanza break)

("Camp Songs," cont'd.)

and if she married Joshua, was sex
 accompanied by trumpet blasts? I dream
 that I'm the woman thrown at Jesus' feet
 by Sadducees whose cocks I've sucked. Stones hot
 in their sweaty palms, they quote laws, "Moses
 this, Moses that." But Jesus just bends down
 and writes in the dirt, "Did you hear the one
 about the shepherd and his sheep?" And laughs,
 my savior laughs and says he covets blondes,
 the way angels dance in my hair. I wake
 my campers crying, "Jesus don't," at dawn—
 I don't know what I wouldn't let him do.

VI. Friday

The sexual cross he has to bear is girls
 he counsels, the camp pastor confesses,
 "I was tempted to reach over and caress
 the breast of a girl from a broken home."
 He wants to know how far I've gone with Jeff.
 "Not too," doesn't seem explicit enough,
 and he insists we kneel and pray for strength.
 Bowing out of reach it occurs to me
 I may recall having spent the whole summer
 on my knees. No sir, no one's deflowered me,
 the scarlet petals of my bud aren't torn,
 my little Baptist peony not broken
 at the stem. My virgin bloom's not yet been plucked,
 but God help me how my pistil's been licked.

"This lake really stinks," I whisper
 to Andy, like it's a secret. "It's stagnant—
 no run-off. We're fishing a dead lake,"
 he whispers back, casting a hula popper
 nonchalantly into the shade of a cypress.
 The smell is all that prevents my tipping the canoe—
 I'm hot and frustrated by the stillness of my bobber,
 amazed that Andy fishes as if fish weren't the point.
 "So Andy, did Jesus mean cute ones
 when he said he'd make me a fisher of men?"
 "Thought you had a man," he answers, grinning
 at my amiable blasphemy. "Threw him back--
 too small to keep." We spell J each stroke

(no stanza break)

("Camp Songs," cont'd.)

paddling through the swampy water to the dock,

where campers wait to tell us we're almost late
for supper. Andy gets them singing on the way
to the dining hall. "Jah mon, dis a Rasta tune
I learn from me Jamaican Baptist mum."
Which is a lie—he and the songwriter are white
as meringue—but when a conga line forms,
I join in. "Shut de do, keep out de devil—
shut de do—keep de devil in the night—
light the candle every ting's all right." Our dancing
slows us down, and we stumble through the screen doors
interrupting grace. The lecture we receive
involves the Godliness of being prompt--Andy slaps
himself Jack Benny style and mutters,
"Lord have mercy, Marnie, this is weird."

Like when my campers did the Pentecost
for Talent Night with Bic lighters I bought,
and three big-haired girls caught fire—
I stand accused of both recklessness
and blasphemy. The walls of the craft cabin
are covered on three sides with camper hand prints—
I've encouraged them to leave their mark and they have
with smears of invented color. The waste
is what the camp pastor finds reckless,
but it's the fourth wall that worries him.
There Jesus reclines on a beach towel, hands
behind his head since I can't draw hands,
sunglasses on since I can't draw eyes,
his hair kinky, brown as mud, and wild.

Not quite worship what my fingers work for
in fistful after fistful of brown curls—
I'm more cautious than that. Here is the church
and here is the steeple—your hair is a game
in a cathedral, it's a forest, it's everything,
Jesus. My God, I can't keep my hands off
my savior, who doesn't seem to mind—
for all my heavy breathing, he just laughs
and palms my own blonde head, moving me
into his lap. This is sweet talk I can trust:
"I want to touch your soul. Say it, Marnie,
say Amen. Baby, I would die for you."
He sweats sweat, not blood, sighs while I pray.
If there's salvation in this body, then I'm saved.

(stanza break)

("Camp Songs," cont'd.)

VII. Saturday Morning

"I season all my food with love," the cook explains
to this week's batch of campers, dabbing tears
she'll have all morning. Parents' cars already line
the muddy cul-de-sac, anxious for this year's
memorized verses and spiritual growth.
I wait with Andy in the kitchen—we've heard
her speech before. "I'm the worst person I know,"
I tell him. "Shh," he answers. His fingers cover
my mouth. "You don't know where these lips have been,"
I laugh, and move his hand away. What's worse
than my behavior, though, is this curious nightly lust
for the body of Christ. "It's not communion
I'm dreaming about," I try to explain,
but Andy's t-shirt soaks up my crying—

he holds the paint-stained material away
from his chest. "Blow," he says, pinching my nose.
"Good girl." We're careless and the screen door bangs,
loud, punctuating our escape from good-bye songs
and adolescent testimonies. "Hey, wait
you two," the camp pastor yells. But we dodge
his scolding, sheltered by modest Chevrolets
and unadorned Fords. We run for the boat dock
despite the storm that knocked cabin shutters
all night and melted glue off popsicle stick
birdhouses. Dark clouds still huddle
along the horizon, like they got quiet
before they meant to. "Lake's got an attitude
all the sudden," Andy grins as we unlock a canoe

to the sound of "Friends," the camp's weekly good-bye tune
distorted on the p.a. "Friends are friends forever,"
it goes, "when the lord's the lord of them." We sing
it wrong, "This song goes on forever...." The water
believes we're dumb, dumb, dumb, and says so.
Each muffled kick accuses us of risk
and doom; each slapping thump should make us go
back, but we've come far enough it makes more sense
to paddle, stalled as we seem, to the far shore
where Roger's Tackle and Tavern glows neon pink
against the funnel cloud green horizon.
"Michael row your boat ashore," Andy sings
as thunder starts to clap. "One thousand one,"

(no stanza break)

("Camp Songs," cont'd.)

I count from lightning bolt to noise. The science
of where lightning hits is inexact—
I can't decide if counting thousands is o.k.
or if Mississippi's better. Not that it matters—
I can't get past two either way.
Andy's switched songs and I'm relieved—
I'd rather a hymn be the last camp song
I ever sing. "Oh, Jesus, Savior, pilot me,"
we shout, "over life's tempestuous seas."
The lake is warmer than the rain and the wind
is cold. We might as well be anchored to the buoys
that circle Roger's beach. "We should walk
on the water," Andy shouts. Which Jesus might do
or he might just tell the storm to shut up,
but nicely. "Peace! Be still!" I quote him and slap

at waves with my paddle. It's not lack of faith
that dumps us in the lake, close enough to swim
to Roger's dock. Slick with algae and rain,
the uneven wooden ladder's hard to climb,
but Roger's at the top, laughing, "Y'all's insane!"
We change into dry Harley shirts, unconcerned
about camp equipment sinking and floating away.
We've just ordered Roger's special when the camp pastor
blusters in. "Praise God!" he shouts, disturbing
the regulars. Roger grins, "Sorry guys,
he made me swear on a Bible." We're all ignoring
the camp pastor by now. "You two want fries?"
The answer's yes. We missed our last chance to eat,
and since then we worked up quite an appetite.